Of citizens and ordinary men: Political subjectivity and contestations of sectarianism in reconstruction-era Beirut

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Throughout this thesis, I have repeatedly cautioned against (inadvertently) hypostatizing analytical categories and pointed out ‘some trouble with’ dichotomous categorizations specifically. Developments that occurred after my main fieldwork period illustrate this point in my own research. The two main categories I worked with – civil society and the people – turn out to refer to a social figuration that is itself far from stable as well. In particular, the models from the ‘Arab Spring’ seem to have instigated a fairly durable shift towards a more ‘activist’ approach in ‘civil society’. In the following I’d like to offer a glimpse of what that shift might be. Quickly after the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings, there were a few substantial marches in Beirut, with protesters chanting the slogan “the people want the downfall of the sectarian regime”. This was of course a play on the ‘viral’ “the people want the downfall of the regime”. If the Lebanese version sounds a bit awkward, it is - also in Arabic. Gone is the cadence and the succinct punch. In an iconic type of way, that awkwardness signalled some of the problems this campaign faced. One problem was that it didn’t have one or two figureheads people could (agree and) focus on, who embodied ‘the regime’ and whose ‘downfall’ would symbolize the downfall of said regime. Of course, as developments notably in Egypt demonstrate, there’s a whole lot more regime than just the figureheads and the latter’s fall really is by itself more symbolic than anything else. In Lebanon however, this was clear from the start. The complexity of ‘the sectarian regime’, and the difficulty of “bringing it down” was immediately obvious. Its entrenchment in society was clear as well. Given people’s quite varied relations to the ‘sectarian’ figureheads (i.e. the leaders who survived the civil war to obtain key political positions), even a consensus about only a few figureheads would be quite difficult. The outcome of the demonstrations subsequently was hardly revolutionary, and the momentum got quickly lost. Interestingly, when some of the activists who participated in the demonstrations came together in the French Institute (in March 2011) to reflect on ‘why the revolution had failed’, they identified a problem of yet another order. The meeting consisted of mostly young adults in the crowd, and a jury consisting of (young) organizers, an activist-academic and a veteran
leftist intellectual. While they did discuss the fact they lacked a proper target of protest (a la Mubarak), they also reflected on the fact that by copying the lexicon of the popular protests elsewhere in the Arab world, they had now imported the notion of “the people” into their activist vocabulary. Specifically, they realized they didn’t know how to actually reach said “people” (and mobilize them for their demonstrations). One result of these reflections was that various activists and NGO-workers subsequently moved to take up more popular stances. Notably, some started working on topics they perceived to be more in “the people’s” interest, such as healthcare, social security and the minimum wage (in contrast to such topics as ‘heritage’, which they would have perceived as a middle-class issue). There’s also been a shift in language use, particularly by putting greater emphasis on “rights”. Rights were always there – as key part of ‘citizenship’ – but social rights were now becoming more important (rather than, say, electoral rights). One may perhaps characterize the result as a blend of a ‘citizenship’ rights discourse and the idea of the people under threat. Moreover, with that shift, at least some members of civil society (like employees of NGOs) also adopted a more confrontational presence in the public sphere, becoming more ‘ politicized’ in that sense.

An example of this shift toward social issues, couched in a discourse of rights, and in a direct appeal to a broader public, was the initiative ‘Haqqi Alayyi’. The name of the initiative is a play on words, as it could be translated as ‘my right depends on me’ and ‘it’s my fault’ (in Lebanese Arabic). The members of the initiative plastered the walls with posters, across Beirut, itself an innovation. The posters, written in dialect, were meant to inform people about their “social rights” (to healthcare, affordable prices for basic goods, public transport, fair and transparent taxes) and generate questions about why they had become “useless” in Lebanon. The thrust of the initiative’s discourse was strongly anti-corruption, now explicitly cast in the need for “regime change” rather than “reform”. Campaigners organized a number of events, most notably a sit-in at the ministry of health (in December 2011), with protesters lying down on its steps between corpses of cloth and paper to symbolize those who had died because of Lebanon’s lack of universal healthcare.\(^1\) The initiative thus combined paradigms from ‘civil society’ (concern with the public good, like public transport; its modalities of mobilization, like “sit-ins”, creative and playful visual work, like the posters, or the corpses), a more radical outlook adopted from the revolutionary times, and a focus on issues important to

ordinary people (public transport recast as ‘social rights’, rather than an environmental issue; social security and economic justice).

The Haqqi Alayyi people were fully expecting to be in it for the long haul. And the change they helped initiate does appear to have been substantive and durable. At the moment of wrapping up this book (September 2015), (violent) protests are taking place in Beirut that were sparked by mounting heaps of trash after the city’s main garbage fill was sealed off by nearby residents. They did so after a deadline passed for the government to come up with a solution for the landfill, which had long exceeded maximum capacity. Garbage disposal is actually an old point of contention as large landfills constitute aesthetic and olfactory nuisances, pollute the environment, and present health risks. However, the file has lingered in government offices and has now come to a head with the frustration of those directly concerned. However, the issue lends itself well to much broader political contention: it combines preoccupation with state failure to ‘take care’ of its citizens, with political ineptitude and corruption, and worries about the environment. All of these aspects are cited by those drawn in to the protests. Participants cite the lack of running water and (uninterrupted) electricity in fact more often as reasons than garbage collection. Symptomatic of the more confrontational presence in the public sphere is that a core group of protesters and organizers uses this occasion to call for the resignation of government and – rhetorically – for all of the major sectarian ‘figureheads’ to resign from politics all together (and “all of them means all of them”). The open confrontation with government, including the willingness of some to physically confront security forces, seems an almost direct continuation from to the politicization of civil society following the ‘Arab Spring’.

At the same time, thus far the demonstrations have not drawn out great numbers people from outside the civil society sphere of influence. And when they do, there is some consternation and reticence about engaging them among a part of other protestors and sympathizers. Consternation about the level of ‘excitement’ and violence of some, and reticence about engaging people obviously from other backgrounds, uncertain about whether they are actually allies. So, one the one hand, the urgency is there, the issues do have broad appeal, and the demonstrations are the talk of the town. The “cry” of anger and frustration is what unites them and brings them into the same place. New connections and identities seem entirely possible. On the other hand, however, ‘civil society’s means of mobilization (channels and networks, protest language, alliances) do not appear to have changed significantly as of yet. It is still unclear therefore what this means for the relation between ‘civil society’ and ‘the people’, or whether these categories will even remain analytically viable.